

«It will be a kind of probation period for Tokayev because the quality of his performance during this time will show if he could be seen as the key player in the election by the political establishment», – states Kazakhstan-based political analyst, Askar Nursha, in the interview to CABAR.asia.

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CABAR.asia: Why did Nursultan Nazarbayev decide to resign from presidency early? Was it a spontaneous decision?



Askar Nursha. Photo from personal files.

The speeches of the ex-president, his address didn't reveal the reasons. At least, there's no official stance in this regard at the moment. The society offers a variety of guesses: some assume it was health of the ex-president, some said about the relations in a "triangle" of Kazakhstan-Russia-USA. In general, I would say that the country's leadership has prepared for the transition of power for a long time. Although officials said the transition of power was irrelevant, the expert community has shaped a certain consensus opinion about the preparations for the transition based on legislative amendments and innovations.

Could Tokayev become the next president elect or is he just a temporary figure?

I think Tokayev has chances to become the next president. First of all, it's remarkable that the president has elected him to delegate powers to. Second, Tokayev has already showed himself internationally not only as the minister of foreign affairs, but also as the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations. Taking into account that ex-president has strategic vision, I think Tokayev has long been on the list of statesmen of Kazakhstan regarded by Nazarbayev as future president. There has not been a certain successor in the last decade. There were few of them, among whom ex-president had to choose, and Tokayev was one of them. So, I think it's quite possible that ex-president appointed future candidates back then and gave them an opportunity to gain experience necessary for the future position, so that they could prove themselves and gain recognition from the global community.



The ceremony of taking the oath of office as the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Photo: akorda.kz

Therefore, it will be a kind of probation period for Tokayev because the quality of his performance during this time will show if he could be seen as the key player in the election by the political establishment. The global situation is still complicated; even if the political administration in the country considers anyone for the office, it is still selecting among the candidates.

Let's recall the situation of the outgoing Yeltsin when three representatives of security agencies were running for the presidential office - Primakov, Stepashin, Putin, and also the mayor of Moscow Luzhkov. The situation reversed so that Yeltsin finally placed his stake on Putin. The same could happen here. So, every existing decision can be changed. I mean that it's actually a probation period for Tokayev as a new prospective president. If he works

well, I think he will continue to be the president as he has all necessary qualities.

Are there any other presidential candidates but Tokayev discussed earlier in the public space of Kazakhstan?

A few candidates have been discussed in the public space these years. They are Imangali Tasmagambetov; members of the Nazarbayev's family, and also Kairat Kozhamzharov. Also, among candidates have been representatives of the 'old guard' who are no longer on the list. The list also contained younger generation.

How effective is the current scenario designed by Nazarbayev? Won't it turn into a Kyrgyzstan-like scenario, when former president tried to take control from behind the scene, and the successor showed his independency?

This scenario looks effective because it has necessary prerequisites. It's clear that none of scenarios can be denied. However, there's one aspect that makes the situation different from the situation in Kyrgyzstan. After all, Almazbek Atambaev is a person who appeared amid revolutionary events and has a certain political style. Second, Atambaev somehow underestimated the potential of Zheenbekov. These are the specific features that are different.

Nazarbayev is a person of the Soviet age, who has a serious administrative and party school background, and has passed through all stages of the regime. Tokayev and Nazarbayev have had more time to pull together. I mean almost thirty years when Tokayev worked under the supervision of Nazarbayev. As the successor issue has been on the agenda for more than twenty years, I think Nazarbayev has had enough time to assess the individual traits of Tokayev, including his reliability. So, I think the situation is different.



Nazarbayev has had enough time to assess the individual traits of Tokayev, including his reliability. Photo: akorda.kz

At the same time, I would like to emphasise that Tokayev is not a known weak candidate and politician. This is a new president who has a completely different political style. Tokayev has worked most of his life in the system of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led this department, worked in parliament. So, he is more likely to look for compromises, he's got tough but not conflict style. However, he is an experienced manager, otherwise ex-president Nazarbayev wouldn't have charged him with such responsible duties in recent years. Or even most important duty to be the second person of the state. As we all remember, the political life of Kazakhstan sometimes required response from the officials, and very often it was Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev who spoke on behalf of the president and authorities in sensitive situations.

I think Kazakhstan has looked into the experience of other post-Soviet countries, other Asian countries, which had longest-ruling leaders, when developing its own scenario of transition of power. It's obvious that the departure of Islam Karimov from the political arena has had a serious impact. The situation in Kyrgyzstan has also been scrutinised: various aspects, two revolutions, and the Otunbaeva phenomenon. The question here is whether Tokayev will become a president or will he have the role of Otunbaeva? Kazakhstan didn't leave the

relations between Atambaev and Zheenbekov behind. All these facts have been taken into account during the transition of power.

What will happen after Nursultan Nazarbayev leaves the political arena? Will the current system be maintained?

The current system has surely been developed to fit to Nazarbayev, but in fact some time has been provided for the transition period, during which the political system can be adapted to new persons. The fact that Tokayev has been selected as the moderator of the transition is also significant. He will be pursuing the policy set by the political establishment; at the same time, he is flexible enough to make necessary amendments to it. I also think that Nazarbayev is not committed to maintain the Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan as it is. First, Nazarbayev understands that he has reached a certain age and it's probably more important for him to keep Tokayev committed to his political legacy. Second, it's important for his inner circle to ensure their security and position in the new Kazakhstan.



It's important for Nazarbayev to keep Tokayev committed to his political legacy. Photo: akorda.kz

By the way, the legislation provides for such moments, for example, the law on the first president provides for a special office. They [inner circle] are also likened to civil servants, so the point is to create all necessary conditions for the first president to act during the transient period. So I think if he leaves physically, there will be no need for such offices for natural reasons, and the political system will be readjusted to fit the new leader.

Which reforms do you think Tokayev or the next president elect should pursue?

Which issues are still unsolved? Which are key issues to be focused on by the new leader of the country?

The key issues for the society are social policy, social sphere. There's a growing public demand for social welfare.

Second, I think, it's necessary to continue the law enforcement reform as the government already understands that effective law enforcement agencies need to exist in new market conditions. I mean market-driven economy, not administrative economy. The process continues but it's obvious that some measures have been postponed to ensure the transition. Third, political modernisation should be continued in terms of strengthening the institutional structure of the political system as many political institutions have existed as a mere formality and have had no real influence. As we can see, the process of transition of power is mainly positive and deliberately constitutional.

Do you remember Nursultan Nazarbayev's address to the constitutional council? Even now the transition is performed according to the constitution, which is in fact of tremendous value for Kazakhstan. We have seen the examples of other post-Soviet countries, when in the event of the death of the country's leader or leaving the political scene, the power has not been transferred to the second person of the state. The power was transferred to prime ministers, for example, Putin or Mirziyoev, or like in Turkmenistan. In fact, other levels of government have been vested with full authority. However, in Kazakhstan we have used the constitutional mechanism. It means respect for institutions. In future years, Kazakhstan, if everything is fine, can be proud of the fact that everything is performed under the constitution, according to the letter of law. Therefore, I think this trend should continue and the role of the parliament should be strengthened and the government should be made responsible for economic reforms and accountable to the parliament.

Will Kazakhstan's policy change towards other Central Asian countries?

I think it's important that president Tokayev comes from the diplomatic environment. In this sphere, the pragmatism is as essential as the principle of reciprocity in inter-state relations. So, it is likely that Kazakhstan will be based on this very principle in its relations with the countries in the region.

The multi-vector policy principle was developed with the participation of Tokayev. So I think Tokayev and the ministry of foreign affairs represented by him were in fact the implementers of this policy. I don't think Tokayev is incompetent in this sphere. Moreover, as a diplomat and a person who has long been the second person in the state he has good contacts with his partners, colleagues in Central Asian states.

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